

PRESS RELEASE

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MAJOR AFRICAN SCULPTURE EXHIBITION OPENING AT ART MUSEUM February 8 - March 19, 1989

Noble Ancestors: Images from Africa--African Sculpture from The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, offers eighty-six of the rarest and most magnificent examples of African art--masks, freestanding sculptures, household objects, and architectural elements--representing more than forty peoples of the culturally diverse African continent. The exhibition opens at The Cleveland Museum of Art on February 8 and will remain on view through March 19, 1989.

The power of African art to evoke emotion and thought is dramatically evident in these works. "African art performs the essential task of conveying ideas and beliefs of the societies who use it," says Henry Drewal, the Museum's consultant for African art, rather than recording and re-creating the world that appears to the senses. Dr. Drewal, who is also professor at Cleveland State University, observes that many Africans view the universe as composed of two inseparable realms--the world we live in and the otherworld, the invisible realm of deities, ancestors, and spirits who affect human affairs--mediated and linked by the religious and social traditions and ceremonies for which so much African art is made.

African artists imaginatively represent the life force, believed to be within everything that exists, by emphasizing a subject's most important elements. In a sculpture of a human figure, that would generally be the head, as the seat of wisdom and the site of a person's spiritual essence. Such a conceptual approach inspired Braque, Picasso, and other modern European artists, and radically changed Western art. But this exhibition presents African art on its own terms, to foster an

understanding and appreciation of why African artists portrayed things as they did and what their art meant to the people who used it.

The importance of sustaining the balance and well-being of human society and nature is the main theme of African art, which is therefore integrated into all aspects of social, educational, economic, political, judicial, and religious life. The works of art in **Noble Ancestors: Images from Africa** are arranged in three groups according to their functions: to teach ancestral laws and traditions to the next generation; to enhance communications between this world and the otherworld; and to signal by their beauty and quality the good taste, wealth, and status of their owners.

Few of these works are more than one hundred years old, for most African art is made of very perishable materials, but their fine craftsmanship, balance, and symmetry result from centuries of artistic development; at its best--as these works testify--African sculpture is dynamic, forceful, moving, refined, with extraordinary "presence." Artists carve wood, or sometimes bone and ivory, and add such materials as paint, copper, brass, nails, beads, shells, and basketry for an array of textures and--for the knowledgeable viewer--religious and symbolic meaning. One of the most powerful works in the show is a dance crest whose entire face and neck and elaborate, inventive coiffure are covered with antelope skin--a dramatically realistic art form unique to the Cross River region of Nigeria and Cameroon; more than two feet tall, worn on top of a dancer's head, it would have loomed over the onlookers. Kota reliquary guardian figures from Gabon and the Congo, whose prominent, wide-open eyes signify their role, are decorated with a variety of metalworking techniques using strips and hammered sheets of copper and brass.

Masks range from elegant okuyi masks of the Puno or Lumbo peoples to a boldly abstracted kifwebe mask from the Songye of Zaire. The okuyi masks, representing the spirits of departed maidens, have darkly tinted features in white faces

and expressions of composure and aloofness. The Songye mask has deep-set eyes, a protruding, shaped mouth, and a bulging, spherical forehead, the entire form exaggerated by curving parallel striations carved into the wood. A tankagle mask of the Dan of Liberia and Guinea combines deep-set slits of eyes, a strong jaw and mouth, and a curl of iron emerging from its forehead in a composition that seems at once introspective and commanding.

Objects that aided communication with the otherworld were treated with sanctified materials--oils, potent herbs, leaves, and roots; they encouraged people to visualize the sacred, serving a purpose similar to that of holy water or a crucifix in Christian traditions. Among the most arresting sculptures in the exhibition is a "nail figure," unusual in its strong asymmetry, from the Kongo of Zaire. Each iron nail or blade hammered into the figure represents a judgment or agreement made before it; anticipating this and hoping the figure would be used often, the artist left much of it roughly carved, and devoted his attention to the upraised hand and refined, naturalistic treatment of the upturned face, suggesting communication by its searching expression and open lips. Behind the mirror in its abdomen is a space containing mud from a fertile riverbank, bones and teeth from animals, branches, leaves, clay, and blood.

Such objects of daily use as wine cups, combs, pipes and boxes proclaimed the taste and social position of their owners. A highly polished stool from the Luba of Zaire, carved by the artist known as the Warua Master, would attest to the dignity of any person important enough--a judge or a chief, for instance--to use it; its strong cylindrical form of a female torso is decorated with intricately carved geometric body patterns, playing against the smooth surfaces of her arms and broad, rounded forehead. A carved door and veranda post indicated the prestige of the occupants of the home. A staff features an idealized portrait of a ruler who commands respect with his serene expression.

Noble Ancestors: Images from Africa was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in honor of the centennial of its sister institution, The University Museum, considered among the earliest and finest museums of anthropology and archaeology in the United States. The University Museum's 11,000 sub-Saharan objects are especially distinguished among American museums by their early acquisition dates--between the 1890s and 1930s--and artistic importance; guest curator Allen Wardwell chose the objects for this exhibition, based solely on their aesthetic excellence, and wrote the accompanying catalogue (available in the Museum bookstore for \$14.95, or \$12.75 for Museum members).

In Cleveland, **Noble Ancestors: Images from Africa** is made possible by the Ohio Bell Foundation. The exhibition and catalogue are supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and The Pew Memorial Trust. Additional assistance comes from the Ohio Arts Council.

Free staff and guest lectures, gallery talks, films, a jazz concert, and a family workshop accompany this exhibition; information about these events is enclosed. Admission to the Museum and to the exhibition is also free.

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For more information, color slides, or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.